

# Introducing oral assessment into courses and programmes at the LSE: Initial guidance

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# Introducing oral assessment into courses and programmes at the LSE: Initial guidance

## Purpose

This guidance focuses on oral assessment, predominantly dialogic forms such as the viva or interview, but it can be used to support any form of evaluation that involves spoken communication, such as oral presentations, simulations and other formats that are evolving. It is intended for LSE staff who currently use oral assessments to evaluate student learning, as well as those considering incorporating them into their courses.

Designing and implementing oral assessment has implications for workload, quality assurance, student experience and the use of technology. This guidance has been written by a Sub-Working Group of the Department AI Leads Group in collaboration with Faculty from a range of LSE's academic departments to support others interested in adopting this form of assessment.

The Sub-Working Group recommends that any Departments considering implementing summative oral assessment in the 2025/26 academic year pay due attention to the learning outcomes of any associated courses, the preparedness of their students to undertake this method of assessment and the support mechanisms (both within and beyond the course) that will be put in place to ensure students achieve to the best of their abilities.

The guidance that follows is aimed at supporting this recommendation.

In addition to this guidance, colleagues may find these Eden resources useful:

- [Assessment and Feedback Principles at LSE](#).
- [LSE Assessment Toolkit](#) – Assessment methods (includes guidance on oral presentations).
- [Presentation by Prof Fabio Arico, UEA](#), at the LSE Talking Teaching event in AT 2023 where he discusses his implementation of oral assessment.

Any colleagues wishing to explore Oral Assessment in their programmes and courses are encouraged to contact their [Eden Centre Departmental Advisers](#) to discuss.

[LSE's regulations for oral assessments are available here](#) (Section 10) – please note that these are in the process of being updated and will be ready for the start of the 2025/26 academic year.

## Context

The UK HE sector has traditionally valued *written* assessments. While oral assessments are common in some European education systems, they are primarily associated with doctoral defence (the viva) in the UK. The rise of Generative AI (GenAI) tools has renewed interest in oral assessments as offering a dynamic alternative to traditional written examinations, while reducing the risk of academic misconduct and ensuring a more secure evaluation process (Walker 2025).

As noted by Akimov (2020) and Ward (2023), in-person and remote oral assessments provide an authentic, secure and flexible way to evaluate students' capabilities across diverse disciplines. They can also provide a more comprehensive evaluation of student understanding and skills and foster deeper learning and critical thinking. Iannone et al (2020) and Gardner (2023) observed that students preparing for oral assessments changed their study habits to focus on understanding concepts rather than memorisation.

## Benefits

There are several compelling reasons to incorporate oral assessment into student evaluation. Whether used alone or alongside other assessment methods, oral assessment offers unique benefits, including:

1. **Alignment with learning outcomes** – Some outcomes are best demonstrated through spoken communication.
2. **Depth of understanding** – Oral formats allow assessors to probe students' knowledge more deeply.
3. **Relevance to real-world practice** – Many professional contexts require verbal communication, making oral assessment more authentic.
4. **Enhanced learning** – The interactive nature of oral assessment can reinforce understanding and retention.
5. **Evaluating intrapersonal qualities** – Such as self-awareness and problem solving.
6. **Student suitability** – Some learners perform better when speaking than writing.
7. **Clarification of questions** – Assessors can explain or rephrase questions in real time, reducing confusion.
8. **Ensuring academic standards** – Oral assessment is a *secure* way to test individual performance and verify registration.
9. **Building student relationships** – Oral assessment can help to create trust and rapport.

## Challenges

While oral assessment offers many benefits, it also presents some challenges:

1. **Student anxiety**: A moderate level of anxiety can enhance performance, but excessive anxiety may hinder a student's ability to demonstrate their true

capabilities. Anxiety may relate to the unfamiliar format of the assessment, uncertainty about possible content or a perceived fear of judgement.

2. **Quality assurance:** Second marking requirements, the provision of feedback and the storage of recordings all need to be considered.
3. **Linguistic competence:** This format of assessment may bring different challenges for students with English as an additional language and there's a risk that native and fluent English speakers may be perceived as more knowledgeable than they are.
4. **Accessibility:** Students with hearing or speech impairments or other disabilities may need tailored adjustments to ensure fair assessment.
5. **Time constraints:** Oral assessments can be time-intensive, especially with large cohorts.
6. **Marker bias:** There is a risk that examiners may be unconsciously influenced by a student's appearance, gender, ethnicity or background. Unlike written exams, oral assessments inherently lack anonymity, which may influence examiner judgment.
7. **Unfamiliarity:** Students may be unfamiliar with the format, which can affect performance.

## Designing oral assessments

Before designing an oral assessment, the first question to ask yourself is **what you are trying to evaluate**? Are you assessing what the student knows, what they can do, or how they apply their skills in a real-world context? Oral assessments can target a range of learning outcomes, including:

- *Conceptual, theoretical, and procedural knowledge:* Oral formats are especially useful for exploring students' depth of understanding and their ability to apply knowledge, while also helping to confirm the authenticity of their responses.
- *Applied problem-solving:* These assessments can test students' ability to think critically and respond to real or hypothetical scenarios, requiring them to justify their decisions using relevant knowledge.
- *Interpersonal skills:* This includes how students communicate with assessors, engage with audiences during presentations, or interact with clients in real or simulated settings.
- *Professional practice:* This involves complex, real-world tasks that combine knowledge, emotion, communication and action—such as consulting with a client or similar scenarios.

The second question is about **the balance of interactivity you deem most suitable for your students**. Oral assessment offers an opportunity for interaction between you and your students, and sometimes even peers or simulated participants. This interaction can range from minimal—such as a formal presentation with little engagement—to highly dynamic

exchanges involving probing questions, discussions, or debates. As interaction increases, so does the potential for deeper insight into student understanding.

Having considered these questions, think about **what method of oral assessment is most appropriate**. These might include role plays, mock interviews, debates, case study presentations to panels, simulated client interactions or the more traditional viva format. The approach you choose should align with your course goals and the specific skills you want to evaluate.

There are several approaches that can enhance assessment effectiveness, for example:

- Developing a bank of questions, sharing them with students in advance and selecting a random subset during the assessment;
- Presenting students with scenarios or problems immediately before the assessment and allowing a short window for preparation;
- Role plays and simulated situations which offer opportunities for practical application;
- Combining oral assessment with other assessment methods, such as follow-up questions on written work, presentations, or group projects;
- Designing oral assessment as an exploratory dialogue that allow students to expand on answers and clarify their understanding through dynamic questioning.

A key challenge lies in balancing structure with flexibility. Predetermined structures help students prepare effectively, reduce anxiety about unknown elements. They ensure consistency across candidates and contribute to assessment reliability. However, overly rigid formats can limit meaningful follow-up questions and spontaneous interactions that often prompt deeper thinking and more authentic responses. Successful oral assessment design requires finding the optimal balance between predictable structure and adaptive flexibility.

*“The key advantages we have found are that assessing students in groups rather than individually makes it easier to manage large numbers and asking students to do spontaneous presentations rather than pre-prepared presentations is more authentic as it means students can’t use AI to create a presentation which they then memorise.”*

Dr Alison Standring, Language Centre

### **Key considerations:**

1. **Alignment:** Ensure that the assessment task aligns with the Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) and Programme Learning Outcomes (PLOs).
2. **Contextualisation:** Consider how to contextualise the assessment and make it authentic. For example, rather than asking a student what they would do in a particular situation, ask them to assume a persona.
3. **Duration:** Students should have enough time to settle in and address the CLOs, but overly long assessments can be exhausting for both parties. Ten to twenty minutes is a rough guide. At postgraduate level, longer durations may be appropriate to accommodate more advanced content and critical engagement.

4. **Question design:** Design appropriate questions for each learning outcome. Focus on depth rather than breadth. Include potential follow-up questions and prompts based on different types of answers (e.g., asking students to clarify an unclear point or provide more detail). Standardise the number of questions, difficulty of questions, and the time allotted. Decide on the order of questions and any tasks students must perform (e.g., whiteboard drawing, screen sharing). Start with an easier or relaxing question to ease students into the exam. Determine how and when you will vary the questions across students (e.g. use of different scenarios).
5. **Preparation balance** - Provide enough structure and advance information to reduce student anxiety while maintaining assessment integrity through varied questions or scenarios.
6. **Structured flexibility** - Design a clear framework that ensures consistency while allowing space for meaningful follow-up questions and deeper exploration of student understanding.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## How do I prepare my students for oral assessment?

Oral assessment may be a new format so take time to consider how to scaffold the assessment. Begin by clearly explaining the purpose, format and expectations to students, allowing time for questions (in class, during office hours and asynchronously). Provide comprehensive preparation guidelines covering key topics, exam structure, timing and detailed assessment criteria that outline how (for example) content, critical thinking, presentation skills and clarity of expression will be evaluated.

Support student preparation through practice opportunities via classroom activities and formative assessments designed to build confidence. Normally, these should include a mock assessment so that students experience the format of the assessment.

Direct students to available support provided by LSE LIFE, the Language Centre and the Student Wellbeing Service – including resources, workshops, courses and one-to-one advisory sessions. Acknowledge that students may face particular challenges (for example English language fluency) but emphasise that the assessment will focus on demonstrating knowledge and learning, rather than confidence or language skills.

Create as relaxed an environment as possible, making it clear that students know they can request clarification during the assessment. If colleagues are new to oral assessment, ensure they are also well supported and can ask questions or seek clarification.

### Key considerations:

1. **Create clear communication** - Transparent explanation of purpose, format, expectations and assessment criteria well in advance (students and colleagues).
2. **Provide support** - Recognise diverse student needs, particularly for non-native English speakers, while providing practice opportunities and resource signposting.
3. **Develop a positive assessment environment** - Create space for clarification requests and deeper exploration of responses during the examination.

*“When incorporating presentations as part of a group project, clear and consistent communication is crucial—not only with students but also with academic mentors. Providing detailed guidance documents that outline expectations, interim milestones, and assessment criteria helps students stay on track and reduces confusion. Having interim milestones helped students stay on track and led to zero requests for extensions.”*

Dr Saipriya Kamath, Department of Accounting

## How do I ensure I conduct my oral assessments in an inclusive manner?

Establishing a supportive and encouraging atmosphere is fundamental to effective oral assessment. Begin by using conversational greetings and maintaining a welcoming tone throughout the process, recognising that student shyness or poor fluency should not influence your perception of their knowledge and understanding.

Providing clear, accessible instructions alongside transparent marking criteria and consistent rubrics to ensure fairness will reduce anxiety. Ensure these are available well in advance so that students are clear about the format of the assessment and how they will be assessed.

During questioning, ask one clear question at a time and pause afterwards, allowing students adequate time to compose their responses. Students should have access to sufficient table space to organise any permitted materials and may be allowed to bring additional prompts or resources as appropriate. Allow students to ask clarifying questions and examiners to re-phrase questions as appropriate.

Accommodate different learning and communication styles by permitting students to make brief notes during questioning to prevent memory overload. Throughout the assessment, maintain empathy for students who may struggle with fluency or nerves while focusing on their demonstration of course knowledge and learning outcomes rather than their communication skills alone.

### Key considerations:

1. **Welcoming atmosphere** - Use conversational tone and greetings while remaining sympathetic to communication difficulties that don't reflect actual knowledge.
2. **Clear communication structure** - Ask single, clear questions and provide students time to process and respond thoughtfully.
3. **Practical accommodations** - Allow note-taking, provide adequate workspace and permit appropriate resources to support student performance.

## How do I mark and grade my oral assessments?

Oral assessments are efficient to grade, especially when supported by rubrics, which ensure fairness, clarity and effective feedback. Well-written rubrics help students understand expectations and can support peer-to-peer preparation. Markers can take notes during the oral assessment, but this can be a multi-tasking challenge—having another assessor present or using structured note sheets can help with grading, feedback and second marking. Some colleagues might consider giving feedback immediately after the assessment, but, when first introducing this assessment method, it might be helpful for consistency, calibration and marker confidence to finalise marks and feedback after all assessments are completed.



Departments can opt to use single marking for small components of assessment totalling no more than 15% of the total course mark. For full details, see Section 13 of the [Instructions for Examiners](#).

Where possible and appropriate, oral assessments should normally be recorded for quality assurance, transparency and enhancement purposes. Where required, External Examiner(s) will be sent a sample to view in order to moderate the marking practices and standards. Recording is now easy to do as most classrooms are equipped for lecture capture and Zoom can be used for recording both in-person and online assessments. Students should be provided with the option of either filming the assessment or recording sound only. As with all assessed work, consideration should be paid to the secure storage of recordings and permission sought from students in advance if recordings are going to be used for standardisation or as exemplars. For example, some students may be happy for audio recordings to be used, but not with video.

For deferred / resit assessments, the same standards apply as for all forms of assessment. If running oral assessments during In-year Resit and Deferral Assessment Period (IRDAP) / Resit and Deferral Assessment Periods (RDAP) is not possible, then standard 'alternative assessment' processes should be followed. Ideally, students should be given the opportunity to practise through formative assessment or be provided with a sample question/mock assessment, if they have not previously been assessed using that format. See [Instructions for Examiners](#), Section 5.

*Please note that the Instructions for Examiners are subject to review during summer 2025.*

### **Key considerations for marking and grading:**

1. **Rubrics:** Create a rubric or scoring guide with explicit criteria/standards, weighting, and model answers for each question. Often with oral assessments, answers are not necessarily right or wrong but demonstrate different levels of mastery. The scoring guide should be straightforward enough that you can fill it in during the oral assessment. Examples: [University of Manchester Marking sheet](#); [Imperial College, London rubric](#).
2. **Prompting:** Decide if prompting means that points will be deducted.
3. **Multiple examiners:** Decide whether to use multiple examiners, which can be helpful for managing time, taking notes, solving technical issues, complying with LSE regulations and grading reliability. If multiple examiners are involved, a pre-assessment calibration meeting can help to ensure marks are consistently awarded.
4. **Recording:** Where appropriate, record the assessment for second markers and external examiners, as well as in case of grade appeals and to share with students if they want to debrief or request feedback on their performance.

## Will oral assessment require more of my time?

There is a trade-off between the time taken to set up oral assessment, and grading and feedback. Oral assessment can be successfully conducted at scale using interactive orals (see Ward et al, 2024). The [presentation that Prof Fabio Arico gave at LSE](#) also argues that oral assessment does not necessarily take more time.

Bear in mind that you can use marking and feedback very efficiently as it can be completed as part of the assessment, although care should be taken with this in terms of consistency and marker calibration. Double marking (where required) can be achieved with two assessors present. Recording the oral assessment will support this process and create a record for the student and QA purposes. See 'How do I mark and grade my oral assessment' above.

## How do I ensure impartiality and fairness?

When conducting oral assessments, focus on the published marking criteria and avoid over-emphasising presentation or speaking skills at the expense of core academic content. The primary objective should be assessing whether students have achieved the fundamental learning outcomes of the course rather than evaluating their communication abilities in isolation.

Consider your approach to marking and moderation. Quality assurance requires revisiting a sample of assessment recordings to ensure consistency and accuracy in marking. Review feedback as well as marks awarded to ensure this targets the content, rather than (undue) focus on presentation style or fluency.

Additionally, proper scheduling is essential for effective assessment - build adequate time into each slot not only for the interview itself but also for completing the marking process, such as allocating 20 minutes for the interview and an additional 10 minutes to finalise scoring.

When multiple markers are involved in the assessment process, ensure all assessors are thoroughly familiar with the rubric and criteria before beginning evaluations. This preparation helps maintain consistency and fairness across different examiners and assessment sessions.

### Key considerations:

1. **Assessment focus** – Prioritise evaluating core learning outcomes over presentation skills, ensuring marking aligns with course objectives rather than communication abilities alone.

2. **Quality assurance and consistency** - Build in adequate marking time during scheduling, review sample recordings and ensure all markers are thoroughly familiar with the rubric and criteria

## What reasonable adjustments can I make?

The School has an anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments. The LSE Policy on Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled students sets out the School's approach to reasonable adjustments. Prior consideration of any barriers students might face can help when planning oral assessments; consider what adjustments could be put in place for, for example, students with communication, cognitive processing or hearing impairments, or with severe anxiety or panic disorders.

Reasonable adjustments should be tailored to individual student needs and the specific assessment format. For presentations, consider modifications such as allowing students to present to academic staff only rather than larger audiences, or to smaller, familiar peer groups. Adjustments may include online presentations instead of in-person formats, pre-recorded submissions rather than live delivery, or modified formats where students prepare slides and scripts for submission without oral presentation. Environmental considerations include ensuring accessible room arrangements and providing time breaks where appropriate (for example, for longer assessments or for students with anxiety disorders or communication impairments).

For vivas, preparation support is particularly valuable. Conducting mock vivas in the actual assessment room helps familiarise students with the environment, while alerting external examiners (with student consent) about disabilities and potential anxiety ensures appropriate support. During the assessment, allow adequate time for responses and breaks as needed.

Students may benefit from bringing additional prompts or resources and having permission to make brief notes during questioning to prevent memory overload. Technical adjustments might include laptop access for thesis navigation, color-coded materials, colored overlays for reading assistance, or specific PowerPoint background and text colors. Scheduling flexibility—offering morning or afternoon slots—and online alternatives can address fatigue, attention difficulties, and other individual requirements while maintaining empathy for communication challenges that don't reflect academic understanding.

### Key considerations:

1. **Individualised support** - Tailor adjustments to specific student needs, from presentation format modifications to environmental accommodations and technical aids.
2. **Preparation and communication** - Provide mock opportunities, inform relevant staff with consent and ensure clear, patient questioning techniques during assessments. You may wish to have a pre-discussion with DMHS to ensure all adjustments and support needs have been considered and applied.

3. **Flexible implementation** - Balance accommodation needs with assessment integrity through scheduling options, alternative delivery methods and practical support tools.
4. **Anticipatory thinking** – Consider when planning your oral assessments how they can be inclusive and help to overcome common barriers faced by disabled students.

## How can I design an alternative assessment to my oral assessment?

Following the *Abrahart v Bristol* ruling and clarification of our [anticipatory duty](#), many staff are naturally mindful of ensuring their students are well supported and able to approach their oral assessment with confidence.

As above, anticipatory thinking will involve prior consideration of the barriers that some students may face. For most students, the existing 'My Adjustments' process will be sufficient in mitigating the impact of the student's disability. The School recognises however, that for a small number of students, the existing 'My Adjustments' process will be insufficient in mitigating the impact of the students' disability. For these students, an alternative assessment should be considered. Annex A in the LSE Policy on Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled students explains the process of how students apply for Alternative Assessments.

Designing an alternative to an oral assessment starts with identifying the core learning outcomes you want to assess. If the goal is to evaluate understanding, critical thinking, or application of knowledge—not the act of speaking itself—then the method of assessment can often be adapted. Ask yourself: what am I really assessing? Is it verbal fluency, or is it understanding, analysis, or application? What am I really assessing? Is it verbal fluency, or is it understanding, analysis, or application?

If the core skill isn't *speaking*, then the method of assessment can be flexible.

If your oral assessment is...	You could offer instead...
A live presentation	A recorded video or narrated slideshow
A viva or Q&A	Written responses to prompts or a reflective blog
A group discussion	A collaborative written report or podcast
A role-play or simulation	A case study analysis or storyboard

There may be few circumstances in which it would not be possible to offer an alternative assessment. Additionally, depending on the Department and the academic field, there may only be a limited range of alternative assessments that are capable of testing a particular degree's competence standards (for example, in light of the presence and implications of artificial intelligence). Professionally accredited or regulated programmes may have prescribed assessment types. In these cases, the programme leader should contact the

relevant Professional and Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB) to establish whether an alternative is permitted.

Remember, it is good practice to design assessments to be as inclusive as possible. This will minimise the need for an alternative assessment in a specific case. In addition, forward consideration of possible alternative assessments will speed up managing requests for these.

### **Key considerations**

1. Use a **shared rubric** across formats to ensure consistency.
2. Limit the **number of options** to avoid overwhelming students.
3. **Be transparent** about expectations and deadlines.

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